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NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE BEFORE THE

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the impact of the Farmland Protection Program here in Pennsylvania. I am Janet Oertly, State Conservationist in Pennsylvania for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I would like to begin by recognizing the efforts and leadership of Members of this Subcommittee, especially Senator Santorum, for taking an active role in this issue.

Pennsylvania is a state with a rich diversity of landscapes created by its location, climate and soils. These soils along with the temperate climate and location near population centers and the eastern seaports have provided farmers the opportunity to provide food and fiber for our nation for over 200 years. Many of Pennsylvania's farm families continue to work the land of their

ancestors. Sustaining farms for centuries has been possible through sound land stewardship, while keeping the land in agricultural use despite the changing needs of society. Because of this tradition of land stewardship, it is no surprise to me, a native of Penns' Woods, that today this state is among the leaders in protecting farmland.

Preserving valuable and highly productive farmland for future generations has been a priority for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Attendees coming to this morning's hearing can observe that signs of sprawl are everywhere in this region. New housing, shopping malls, and the transportation network that supports these developments continue to grow.

Pennsylvania has the one of the highest rural populations in the nation. Farmers on the edge of urban development face many challenges.  As development ensues, these lands are pressured to succumb to the financial incentives of development. As a response to the need to protect Pennsylvania's largest industry, agriculture, the state has used federal programs such as the Farmland Protection Program (FPP) to enhance local and state programs.

Governor Ridge's 21st Century Commission identified sprawl as the most important environmental issue in the state. The recent passage of Pennsylvania's Growing Greener and Growing Smarter legislation provides a significant increase in state funding and local planning for farmland protection. The partnerships that have been so effective in initiating farmland protection in this state are responding to the ever-growing demand.

**THE FARMLAND PROTECTION PROGRAM (FPP) IN PENNSYLVANIA**

Mr. Chairman, as Mr. Sells testified, the Farmland Protection Program (FPP), authorized by the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (1996 Act) protects prime or unique farmland from conversion to nonagricultural uses.

In Pennsylvania, the FPP matching funds have been used to leverage funds from the State, and local government entities that have farmland protection programs. The FPP has facilitated conservation partnerships with the State and local government entities to acquire conservation easements or other interests in land. It is one part of a broader effort to protect farmland from urbanization and helps maintain a healthy environment and sustainable rural economy.

The national program was originally funded in the 1996 Act at a level of $35 million. Pennsylvania received over $3 million of that national funding. All of these funds were committed by Fiscal Year 1998, and the easement acquisition process is underway. With these funds, 57 farms, representing 11,419 acres of farmland in Pennsylvania will be permanently protected and will continue to remain in agricultural uses. In addition, the federal investment in FPP has spurred about $24 million in state and local contributions for this activity. This is an impressive return on a relatively small federal investment. This represents that for every federal dollar sent to Pennsylvania there has been another $8 in state and local funds to match this investment. I might add that each of these farms has a conservation plan and the owners have committed to a schedule for complete implementation. The availability of technical assistance

funding needed to help farmer's plan and implement these plans is an important part of the program.

I would like to describe one example of the program in southeastern Pennsylvania. Three farms in Berks County's scenic and productive Oley Valley add over 350 acres of permanently protected farmland to the 28 farm, 3600-acre block of farmland in the Valley. The Berks County Agricultural Land Preservation Board, in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has protected this block of land. The Oley Valley is comprised of over 85 percent Class I and II limestone soils, and has been one of the regions' most important agricultural areas since being originally cleared by German farmers over 200 years ago. Today, the valley is listed on the National Historic Register and has many historic gristmills, barns, stone buildings, covered bridges and villages. The Brown, Mast and Rothermel, Hopwood and Ford farms, added with help from 1998 Farmland Protection Program funds, are all adjacent to other permanently protected farms.

The Farmland Protection Program is making progress in protecting farmland, utilizing a relatively small federal resource. But the needs are great and more resources are needed. As Mr. Sells indicated, our agency is committed to working with you Mr. Chairman, and Members of this Committee to continue funding and support for FPP so that we can maximize the benefits of these local initiatives, which have been enhanced by the FPP.

I look forward to working with you on this issue.  We need to extend the funding authorization for FPP to make it work. S. 333 and S. 598 would enable us to continue this work, as proposed in the President's budget.

I thank the Chairman and would be happy to answer any questions that members might have.